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ART. VI. — OF POETRY AND VERSE-MAKING.*

THE angry god who dealt so vigorously with Marsyas understood perfectly well the insufficiency of any milder discipline upon so important an occasion. The succession of the poetasters is perpetual. The mediocre is always halting behind excellence, while the camp-followers, "pioneers and all," close the long procession, here strident and there musical. In every collection of fables, from Æsop to Pilpay, the crow cries canorous conclusions with the nightingale. In the very beginning of his Virgilian studies, the school-boy, too often neglectful of the warning, encounters Barrus and Mœonis, that luckless pair, nailed fast in the pillory of an immortal hexameter; while we still groan with Horace at the bore who claims his literary fellowship in the Via Sacra. Satire, merciless, sanguinary, and savage, can never silence, and much less can it extinguish the brood whose only hippocras is small beer. Nobody can understand why Shadwell did not hang himself upon the very first perusal of McGlecnœ, or how Dennis lived to a good old age in spite of fustigations such as no mortal man ever before suffered and survived. In literary discipline the *fortiter in re* has proved a failure. Nobody wrote a line the less because of his niche in the Dunciad, or acknowledged himself to be a fool because he had been exhibited to the world as living in a garret, as haunting cheap ordinaries, as shabby and penniless and hungry.

The inefficiency of the ordinary methods of dealing with bad poets may be partly attributed to a lack of sincerity. The verse-maker who, after he has done his best, instead of being well paid,

* *Avenia: A Tragical Poem on the Oppression of the Human Species.* By THOMAS BRANAGAN. Philadelphia. 1802.

The Fall of Virtue: Being a Paraphrase of the whole Book of Job. By CHAUNCEY LEE, A. M. Hartford. 1806.

The Napolead. In Twelve Books. By THOMAS H. GENIN. St. Clairsville, Ohio. 1833.

The Months: A Poem. By BENJAMIN J. HERVE. Lancaster, Pa. 1874.

The Vendetta, and Other Poems. By THOMAS BROWER PEACOCK. Topeka, Kansas. 1876.

Suicide, considered Practically and Philosophically. By CHARLES J. COLES. New York. 1876.

and benevolently encouraged to go on, is denounced as a pretender and made the laughing-stock of literary circles, naturally feels that he is there treated not as an offender against the canons of the poetic art, not because he is a botcher and a bungler, but merely that at his expense a clever man may display his own brilliant dexterity. Whatever may be the faults which are then set forth and censured, — and often they are patent to the world without formal indication, — it is impossible to separate from their too eager experience the suspicion of a malevolent motive, or careless disregard of the unprofitable suffering so needlessly occasioned. The quarrel of Pope with the scribblers was personal and not critical. The animosities of Swift were against men and politicians, and not against writers as such. Gifford, a poor young man just from the shoemaker's bench, and anxious for reputation and success, waged a horrid war, which was no better than mercenary, against the moths and the maccaronis of the Della Crusca. Mr. Bingham, importuned by Jeffrey for a showy article, met, accidentally perhaps, with the "Hours of Idleness," and gladly improved the opportunity of abusing simultaneously a poet and a peer. Lord Macaulay's well-known paper upon Satan Montgomery may have had no higher origin. The poems which were reviewed were as bad as possible, it is true; but, on the other hand, they were below criticism and unworthy of the notice of the "Edinburgh Review." Hundreds of people have said sharp things of Mr. Tupper, who would never of themselves have discovered the rare and meritorious character of his platitudes.

There is a method of dealing with the whole tribe of verse-makers in gross, which involves some inquiry into the real nature of their mistakes and offences. It may be possible in a friendly way to make them comprehend the substantial immorality of wasting time and talent in doing what it is impossible for them to do well, and in persistently producing that for which, even though it were fairly done, the world has no occasion. Young people betake themselves to the penning of stanzas, when they should be engrossing, or doing something still more useful, partly from a genuine, however limited, poetical feeling, which they erroneously suppose to be a special and exclusive emotion of their own; and partly because they find, with all the pleasure of a discovery, that to rhyme is easy, and that a tolerably accurate met-

rical arrangement of words is by no means difficult. It is not merely by a devotion to longs and shorts, to male and female rhymes, to odes and elegies, to epitaphs and sonnets, and, alas ! sometimes to epics, that beginners are misled, and left floundering in a slough of despond. They try painting, sculpture, and music ; they spoil canvas, waste clay, and wear out instruments, and all without achieving any result of the slightest importance, even to themselves. Only failure and disappointment can come of a mistaken, however honest, estimate of personal capacity ; and such a mistake persisted in may squander many a weary year of life, only to end at last in tragedy.

To men of a certain temperament mediocrity is better than silence, and even notoriety than absolute obscurity. Apart from the difficulty which they experience in making a just estimate of their own productions, they find a pleasure even in the pretence and show of doing what it is not given to all to do. The origin of most of the volumes at the head of this article is not far to seek. These writers, we may assume, are human beings. They think, feel, love, suffer, hope ; they are not wanting in a liking for the beautiful, whether in art or in nature ; they feel with sensitive facility necessitudes, whether painful or pleasant ; and they are not deficient in a due appreciation of the merits of the poems usually found in domestic collections. They do not stop to inquire, possibly they are incapable of inquiring, whether to them has been vouchsafed any fresh and peculiar revelation of the mystery of existence, of the meaning of the past, of the duty of the present, of the probabilities of the future ; that which they have to sing may have been often sung before, but this is a point which they scarcely pause to consider at all. They assume a universal interest in their own presentation of what is either private and personal to themselves, or within the common knowledge and daily experience of all the race. They make little or no distinction between what is printed and what is worth printing, and their names upon the title-pages of puny and still-born duodecimos, fortified only by paper or cloth covers, seem to them to be as indelibly recorded as if carved in gigantic characters upon the walls of a pyramid. They are famous in villages, and illustrious in a corner of the county newspaper, and when their effusions are numerous enough to fill a volume, the volume is printed and perishes almost in the process.

Life is short, and in considering these unlucky books the waste of time which the proportions of some of them imply must not be overlooked. The poem called "The Months" by Mr. Herve is a book of 225 pages, and contains about 8,900 lines. In 1806 the Rev. Chauncy Lee paraphrased, it appears, the whole Book of Job, writing, probably with his own hand, about 5,000 lines, and among them these:—

". . . . beauteous daughters three,
Again compose his smiling family,
Jemima, Kerrenhappuch, and Kezia!"

Mr. Branagan's "Tragical Poem of Avenia" fills a book of 308 pages, and contains 10,472 lines. Mr. Genin's "Napolead" is in twelve books, and contains 11,187 lines. Productions like these are not written in a day. There is something touching in the wasted application to which they owe their existence. To live for years a life of uninterrupted rhyming, to pass every day and night in dactylic mensuration, to think poetry, breathe feet, walk stanzas, dream cantos, wake to the same task of harmonious drudgery every morning, to live as it were under the perpetual surveillance of the Muse at home, abroad, everywhere, — this is a fate from which the warmest admirer of lines beginning with capital letters might well ask to be saved! It is a consolation, as we recede still further from the antediluvian period, that poems of Mastodonian proportions have become almost unknown. Very few of the builders of rhyme now venture upon a twelve-storied epic, partly because no magazine will print it, and partly because no publisher will so much as look at it. The master-singers of the century usually set an example of commendable brevity, and their imitators and apprentices have at least sense enough to follow it. Naturally, the mob of gentlemen and ladies who write with ease prefer the lighter labor of the lyric. Instead, therefore, of a small number of big poems which nobody can read, like Mr. Dwight's "Conquest of Canaan," or Mr. Barlow's "Columbiad," or Mr. Emmons's "Fredoniad," we have a large number of little poems, each of which anybody may, if so minded, read without undue coercion of the faculty of perusal. These little are to these big as an ode of Anacreon to the Iliad or an epigram of Martial to the Pharsalia of Lucan. If we are spared the full symphony, we can surely listen to these waltzes or sarabands thrummed upon the guitar. And yet

there is something wearily monotonous in both the topics and the treatment. Of love we expect every poet to discourse with more or less distraction of manner and of matter; but why should the love of one enamored bard be exactly like that of another? Why should the same things be said over and over again about the seasons, the flowers, the stars, the zephyrs, and the birds, about twilight and daylight and midnight, about childhood and old age, about death and burial and the resurrection? And why should twenty writers in their writings be as precisely like as two peas? Surely a thing, having been well said or ill said, may be dismissed, that other things equally important or unimportant may receive attention. Why is Spring always "gentle" in our small poems, especially as she is usually such a termagant in the weather-reports? Why is she always "waking from her long repose"? Why do we always have her "verdant leaves" and her "opening buds"? Why is she always called "a spirit hovering there"? Why must we be always asked to smell the same nosegay, the hyacinth and daffodil, the daisy and the dandelion? Yet the moment a true poet introduces us to these objects, familiar as they are to weariness upon the printed pages, how they start into a new beauty and grow fragrant with a diviner essence! Nature, become an absolute dowdy in second-hand and third-rate portraiture, is again fresh, original, and comely! The same things are said; the same phrases are used; there is nothing of novelty. Speaking strictly, in the subject, yet in the absence of pretence, and under the charm of a genuine affection, we seem never to have heard these wood-notes before. Between the spring of Mr. Bryant and the spring of Mr. Nobody there is a likeness of letter which makes the world-wide difference of spirit at once a pleasure and a puzzle.

The biography of one of these little cambric-clad books of verses, so altogether harmless and unimportant, would itself be curious, entertaining, and didactic. The writer finds out, all too early in life, that he can make rhymes, and he makes them, to paternal wonder, and the envious admiration of his schoolmates. Then comes to him the exquisite pleasure of print in newspaper or magazine. He collects; he publishes in a volume with an affected title, and a fanciful dedication, and a preface saturated with that vanity of self-depreciation which is the vainest of all. "Notices" and advertisements follow, and then all is over. Of such merchandise

the sale is necessarily small, and even the desire to give away the whole edition is limited by a sense of decent personal dignity. In a few months the verses are utterly forgotten, if anything can be forgotten which has never been known. How should they be remembered when so many works of real merit have passed into oblivion! The frequenter of the stalls finds the poor, forlorn book, with its back broken, with its dainty binding defaced, its leaves dog's-eared, and its price reduced from several dollars to a single sixpence. The rains of heaven have fallen upon it; the dust of the street has covered it; the pickers-up of unconsidered trifles have left their thumb-marks upon it, and it lodges disreputably in a heap with old grammars and dismal Congress documents and odd volumes of religious magazines. As we have lifted up, and out of whim or for some special reason have rescued, the waif from the purgatory of the pavement, we have sometimes wondered whether the writer was satisfied with one trial and failure, and went sadly but resolutely back to some business containing the potentiality of wholesome bread-and-butter, or whether, in a life-long obscurity, he persisted in producing other and like volumes, in their turn to be printed and to perish. To what avocations do these writers betake themselves when the thrills of fancy and the pursuit of fame are alike abandoned? Are they ever radically cured of the intellectual distemper which betrayed them into the worst of blunders,—the blunder of putting out a book not wanted now, and never likely to be wanted through all the ages? And, if so cured, with what mortification must they look back upon the old hopes and aspirations, the vanities, the self-complacencies, and the absurdities of their nonage! The dreadful mistake is perhaps suspected among their friends, who never mention it; fortunate is the reformed scribbler, if his enemies do not know that he has written a book! The only instance which we can recall of an immediate and thorough repentance is that of John Kemble, who, in early life, published and suppressed within the space of a single day a volume of verses. But, alas! while he was thus rapidly coming to his senses, several copies of the work had been sold; and collectors now pay enormous prices for the rarity. More than one practical merchant or hard-headed old broker, who left college redolent of the honey-dew of Castalia, and so printed his poems before he fully comprehended what he was doing, blushes as he

recalls his indiscretion, and regretfully remembers the copies which he presented to libraries. How sure he felt that he was one

“*Ingenium cui sit, cui mens divinior, atque os
Magna sonaturum*” ;

and how sure he is now that his *ingenium* is for selling short, his *mens* for making a corner, and his *os* for the bellowing or the growling of the stock-exchange! We are all nightingales in the springtime of life, and then — *vox corvis canentis*!

The disappointed minstrel whose epics or elegies, songs or sonnets, mankind has obstinately refused to read, regards himself as ill-treated, and declines to accept the readiest explanation of such neglect. It might illuminate his understanding if he would but consider that no book lives for more than an extremely limited period, except by sheer force of its own peculiar merits, while according to this law some books cannot live at all. To real excellence the world is singularly just, not instantly it may be, but usually at last. Those who divert themselves with the antiquities of literature find a charm in the obsolete as such, and regard a piece of printing as the Antiquary in Congreve's comedy regarded a mummy, or as Martinus Scriblerus expanded with rapture over a rusty old buckler. But the truth remains that most of those who have written English verse since the days of Gower are hardly known to readers by name, and not at all by their works. The most brilliant contemporaneous reputations have faded into blank nothingness, and men have risen to reputation and fallen to oblivion even in a single generation. The probable nature of poetical fame ought to prove to every young aspirant how uncommon is a poetical faculty original enough to warrant cultivation. A poem which will be of no importance to the twentieth century can be of no vital importance to the nineteenth. Newspapers and most pamphlets we know are for to-day; novels meant only to amuse can amuse only those for whom they are constructed; in various departments of literature there is no pretence of an elevated purpose; but in the writing of poetry there is at least an assumption of a higher mood, and an implied attempt to refine and elevate mankind, to assuage grief by a profound sympathy, and to foreshadow an existence unhampered by the accidents of time and undeluded by the senses. History proves that only to a very few is it given to

raise the immortal strain of immortality, and reason supports and explains the testimony of history. The relation of the teacher to the taught must always be that of one to many; and in no age and to no people have the prophets come in battalions. If the young man who fancies himself a poet born will but consider seriously what a poet is, he may perhaps lower his self-estimate. If he can be made to comprehend how little needed are his own productions, he may abandon an enterprise which can only go on in waste, and only end in disappointment. Of all the spheres of intellectual activity, why should he elect that in which discomfiture is all but predestinate.

If one writes verses long enough, and is not hopelessly deficient in ear,—we mean ear for verbal melody,—the presumption is that in time he may write them correctly. The imitators of Pope had exactly the measured swing of their master, the same syllabic distribution of accents and pauses, and everything except his warmth and wit and wisdom. Merely mechanical merit is the lowest of qualities; and even in this our verse-mongers are often deficient. They have nothing to say, and they say it badly. But clumsiness is not so intolerable as the coarse affectation of strength, the pretence of passion, the making of mournful or mad faces, the cheaply terrible, the repulsively amorous, the simulation of eccentricity, the studied oddity, the disregard of method and of established literary forms, the insolent vulgarity, the restless variety, and the impertinent subjectivity, of which we have recently had too much. It is sad to be only a bad Tupper; it is sadder to be a bad Byron. It is discreditable to write dime-novels in prose; it is infinitely more so to write them in verse. Several of the volumes named at the beginning of this article, if valuable for nothing else, are at least good examples of sound and fury, signifying nothing. A sick girl, alleviating the tedium of her chamber by stringing innocent couplets together, may be pardoned if she gathers her small blossoms into a bouquet of a book, and tries to sell it that she may buy bread; but when Mr. Thomas Brower Peacock writes his “Vendetta” in five calico cantos, which are to poetry as reporter’s English is to the English of Addison, what is there to say except that fine feathers, in spite of the proverb, may make exceedingly vulgar birds? Nothing strikes us more forcibly and unpleasantly than the bad workmanship of most of

the books named by us. It was once customary for reviewers to parade the blunders and absurdities of a writer brought to the bar of critical judgment, and to perform something like a vivisection at which the reader was expected to laugh. For this method of dealing with the metrical disease we have little taste; but it may not be superfluous to warn neophytes that they may possibly present to the eyes of the judicious a figure altogether laughable.

Finally, we may be permitted to suggest that verse-making, which is by no means a difficult business, may also be an innocent recreation from which we would by no means debar the young amateur. We have rarely read the preface to a volume of fugitive poetry which did not contain a frank acknowledgment that it was not worth printing. Why, then, print? Are there not secret places in which their bantlings may be hidden? Are there not stoves in which they may be burned? Are there not dealers who go from door to door and purchase waste paper? The young bards assure us, in the constantly quoted language of Coleridge, that poetry has been its own exceeding great reward. Why, then, seek any other? Why, then, put it into the market to be sold for a price? Why these little feeble grasps at immortality? All that there is of any value in the whole *corpus* of all the poets in all languages is worthless compared with sincerity and veracity of life. So much is within the reach of all; and happy are they who secure it, though they may miss praise which is so sweet, and fame which seems to be a prize to the famous, and, in truth, is of value only to those by whose acclamations it is conferred.

CHARLES T. CONGDON.

ART. VII. — THE INSURANCE CRISIS.

LIFE-INSURANCE has sometimes been adduced as a measure of the social progress and condition of a people. Be that as it may, it can safely be said that it has flourished only in an advanced civilization. Depending upon the heaven-born precept to bear each other's burdens, life-insurance affords the most successful application of the scientific doctrine of probabilities to the wants of our better nature. By the application of this principle, compensation